

## PRESENTATION

—*L S Gassah*

---

It may be possible to identify or find out the 'roots' of insurgency in Northeast India, but these 'roots' may not be the same in all the situations as far as the North-Eastern States of India are concerned. What was or is applicable in one or two states of the region may not be the same for all the states. For example, the 'roots' of insurgency in Nagaland or Mizoram may not be the same as in Assam or Meghalaya or Manipur. Sometimes, some scholars tend to point out that these are the roots of insurgency in the states of Northeast India, whereas in reality, they are not 'roots' but 'influence' only of one insurgent group on others. Thus, these two things – 'roots' and 'influence' are to be separately identified and analysed. The two are not to be used interchangeably as they represent two different aspects of the same issue. Further, in one particular state, it might be the roots of insurgency but on the other state, it may turn out to be the 'influence' of a group of insurgents on the other. The two issues may also be separated on the basis of the time that insurgency got started in a particular area or state of the region and how that same idea

influenced the others at a later stage. It is therefore very important to differentiate between 'roots' and 'influence' of one insurgent group on the other or others. On the other hand, those insurgent groups who have been 'influenced' by the activities or actions of others must have considered the matter or things that happened around them seriously before launching the insurgent programmes or following the footsteps of others. As far as the factors or reasons for being influenced as such are concerned, it is very difficult to point out specifically at this stage. Such factors may not also be universally applicable to all. They are surely different from time to time and from one state to another or more specifically, from one ethnic area to another within the same state.

In our effort to find out 'roots' of insurgency in Northeast India, it may be necessary to trace certain historical developments relating to society, culture, tradition and custom, language/dialect, routes of migration, racial characteristics, etc and examine whether such factors have anything to do with the 'roots' of insurgency. Of course, the political development during and after the British administration all over Northeast India is one of the most convenient roads to travel to find out and identify the 'roots' of insurgency in the region. The subsequent developments, or those which took place immediately after India's independence, and the indifferent attitude shown by the political leaders of Assam, and the Government of Assam itself, towards the hill tribal people contributed a lot to the problems of insurgency in Northeast India. These and other related issues are being discussed here to find out the contributing factors leading towards the 'roots' of insurgency in Northeast India.

As far as historical development is concerned, be it in the area of administration, political, social and economic, this part of history is a well-known area to all those scholars who have laboriously spent their time, energy and academic pursuits on the North-Eastern Region. Therefore, we need not go into the details of it. The situation is similar, or at least near-similar, to all the tribes or communities in the region. The tribal communities of Northeast India did live an independent life before they came into contact with the British. They were administered independently by their own traditional chiefs and other institutions. This fact is mentioned here purposely, because while explaining one of the 'roots' which gave rise to the problem of insurgency in Northeast India, some such insurgent groups explicitly mentioned this crucial aspect of history as one of the reasons why they wanted to free themselves from the yoke of the Indian State. They invariably go back to their past history and tell the world what they were and how they were administered before the British either annexed or took over the administration of their respective areas. They also made it clear that they want to enjoy the same independent status that their forefathers had enjoyed. This may therefore, be seriously considered as one of the 'roots' of insurgency in Northeast India. Whether such a demand is reasonable, or whether such an arrangement is feasible, or not, it is beyond the purview of this presentation.

In the next stage of administrative development, mention may be made of the British period and its administration over the different areas of Northeast India – hills and plains. To the people of the hills, the British administration was an important milestone which decided many ups and downs in their life –

be it in administrative matters, religious belief, cultural, social and economic, as well as political. The British administration shaped not only the people's life and other activities during that particular period but also their future in different aspects and directions. For example, the Nagas while demanding a sovereign independent State or Nation for themselves, they went on referring to their conditions of independent status before the coming of the British and their acceptance of being conquered and subjugated only by the British and no other forces, before or after that. This has also led them to interpret the Ninth Article or Clause of the famous Hydari Agreement signed between the then Governor of Assam, Sir Akbar Hydari and the Naga leaders in 1947 to mean that after the expiry of the ten year period of the Agreement, the Nagas could assert that they were at liberty to decide their own future, including that of complete separation from the Indian Union. This is an important 'root' in the initial stage of the Naga secessionist or autonomy movement which gave rise to insurgency in Nagaland in the early 1950s. Against this background, it is difficult to deny the fact of the 'influence' of the same 'root' on the secessionist activities and insurgency movements among the Mizos as well as the other tribal and non-tribal communities in almost all areas of Northeast India from the 1960s onward. Therefore, the 'roots' of insurgency that were deeply planted by the Nagas in the 1950s expanded and spread silently to other neighbouring areas of Northeast India.

In the pre-independence period and for few years after India's independence, the tribal communities in Northeast India did not have any psychological and emotional integration with the rest of India. In fact, the integrative forces did not

work among the tribal communities immediately after India's independence or even during the time of the Indian struggle for independence from the British rule. The hill tribes of Northeast India cannot be blamed for that. They were not persuaded to get themselves involved in the national freedom struggle. No one took initiative to explain to the hill people the concept of an Indian nation and how the hill tribal people in India's northeast frontier areas could form part of that one nation. This is one of the reasons why they were insulated from the main theatre of national movement which, if things are correctly knitted together, could speak a lot about what were aspired by them on the question of their insulation and indifferent attitudes towards the Indian State. The British authorities were also to a large extent responsible in discouraging the tribal people from taking part in the national freedom movement. The indifference of the tribal people to the Indian national movement, or the failure of that movement to make an impact in the tribal areas in Northeast India, should be considered as a major 'root' of insurgency in the region after the independence of the country.

Even after the independence no serious effort was noticed on the part of the national or provincial leaders to involve the tribal people in Assam in the nation building processes. On the contrary, a section of the Assamese leaders and intellectuals advocated the 'assimilation' of all non-Assamese people in the province of Assam through Assamese language and culture, which ultimately further alienated the tribal people who considered this policy of 'assimilation' as a major threat to their respective cultural identities. The hill state movement started in that background. Therefore, the fear that the tribal

identity would be lost as a result of 'assimilation' may be considered as another 'root' of insurgency in Northeast India. It was a grave mistake on the part of the Assamese leaders to have aggressively preached their gospel of 'assimilation' of the tribal communities living within the jurisdiction of the then province of Assam, which was actually created by the British to consist of the traditional Assamese area and some equally traditional tribal areas. Such attempt made by the political leaders of Assam amply demonstrated their short-sightedness, their inability to look beyond their nose and their false pride of superiority complex. To bring home this point, it is worth quoting here what Shri Rohini Kumar Choudhury, a prominent Assamese leader, had to say during the time of the debate in the Constituent Assembly (5-7 September 1949) on the proposed provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. Shri Rohini Kumar Choudhury was so opposed to the idea of accepting and incorporating the Sixth Schedule into the Indian Constitution and so ethnocentric in his approach towards the hill tribal people of Northeast India that during the course of the Constituent Assembly debates, he had this to say: "We want to assimilate the tribal people. We were not given that opportunity so far. The tribal people, however, much they like (?) had not the opportunity of assimilation." It is thus very clear that there was a serious attempt to assimilate the tribal people of the region into the Assamese society in spite of their opposition to such sinister design by the political leaders of Assam. That is why in his reaction to this kind of intolerant attitude and ethnocentric remark of Shri Rohini Kumar Choudhury, Reverend James Joy Mohon Nichols Roy, a leader of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, had to strongly defend the

proposed provisions of the Sixth Schedule in the Constituent Assembly. He said among other things : "The tribal people should not be allowed to be swallowed up by another culture which is quite different from what they have been used to, and which is considered by them not at all suitable to their society." Therefore, it may not be wrong to say that the intolerant attitude of the Assamese leaders and their sinister attempt to assimilate the tribal people was a serious mistake and its outcome had far reaching consequences in the subsequent years which the political leaders of Assam did not envisage at all. Needless to say, the parochial attitude of the Assamese leaders, which was very clearly reflected in the language policy of the Assam Government, is a very important 'root' of turmoil and mutual distrust among the communities in Assam, which eventually matured into insurgency. It is also equally important to note that the indifferent attitude shown by the other members of the Constituent Assembly from the rest of the country towards the Assamese opposition to the proposed political autonomy to be constitutionally granted to the tribal people in Northeast India, particularly in Assam, had hurt the sentiments of the many tribal leaders of those days and the intolerant opinions of the Assamese leaders continued to haunt the minds and thoughts of the tribal people for many years which actually added to the strengthening of the 'roots' of insurgency in Northeast India.

History tells us clearly and loudly that the seeds of hatred were not sown initially by the tribal people; others were responsible for that. The seeds that were sown by someone were slow to germinate. The roots and tendrils spread out silently beneath the surface long before there was any symptom

of sprout or bud. Then suddenly, one fine morning (or should we say, evening), like a springing of a new seed, the soil broke up and a new head of a seed appeared out of the breaking soil. Suddenly, out of nowhere, there was a blaze of colour, an overnight growth; the rebels/insurgents are there and everywhere in the entire Northeast. Thus the fear of assimilation and subjugation of one's own culture and tradition by the more advanced neighbouring people ('more advanced' in terms of language and literature, population, education, economy, and political majority) gave rise to fear and continuous suspicion of the others or outsiders, which ultimately resulted in raising the voice of revolt or armed insurgency, as a means to survive culturally, economically and more important, politically. When the situation had come to the extent of failure to adopt and use constitutional means, the alternative that was left was the use of extra-constitutional means to achieve certain goals, manifesting emancipation – cultural, economic and political. When the voice of democratic or constitutional method of protests and demands seemed to be too feeble to make an impact on the authority which is responsible to provide protection and guarantee development, the militant path seems to have been adopted. Once this method or means is adopted, the definitional meaning of insurgency is also fulfilled.

The support extended to the militants, both through dubious and open means, by other countries bordering Northeast India, is another 'root' which allowed the insurgency in the region to go on and on. The insurgents get and enjoy support from across the borders in different ways and means, like supply of arms and ammunition, places to use as their safe hideouts, training

in armed struggle, finance, and all sorts of assistance to keep the struggle alive and kicking all the time. Secondly, it is not only the enemies of India across the borders who come to the help and assistance of the insurgents, there are also other factors that contribute to the cause of the insurgency. The ethnic communities located on the international borders have strong kinship and historical economic linkages with the tribes across the borders. Due to such ethnic affinities, the relationship continues in different ways. The cross-country trade and commerce also strengthens that relationship. The cross-border trade may not necessarily be limited only to essential items, but also include contraband and dangerous goods like arms and ammunition, explosives, drugs, and fake currencies. These items are smuggled from time to time by the insurgents across the borders either for their own use or for sale to other like-minded insurgent groups all over the North-Eastern Region. These clandestine activities help in strengthening the 'roots' of insurgency in the region. Equally important is the porous borders all along the region. The channels to operate against the Indian State are readily available through these borders.

The roots of insurgency in Northeast India may also be linked with the issue or problem of ethnicity and assertion of ethnic identity within the region. The failure of the established authority, that is, the Government of India, to tackle the basic aspects of ethnic question has also been responsible for social, economic and political instability in the region. It is the persistent reluctance of the central government for many decades to openly face the manifestations of the ethnic question in the Northeast that most of the discords began and the same situation continues to exist even today. The different

ethnic groups of the region while seeking and trying to redress their problems of deprivation (which arise in various shades and magnitudes) mobilized and organized themselves into different types of pressure groups. Some of them did try to solve their problems within the parameters of the Indian Constitution, but there are many others who did not subscribe to this approach giving the rationale of its hopelessness. They articulated the argument that the Government of India is not aware of the fact that the various ethnic groups in the region have their own history, culture, language, and distinct way of life and that any attempt to ignore this very sensitive aspect of ground reality through assimilation, or political and administrative imposition, is bound to give rise to different forms of aggressive or militant movements. As a matter of fact, the ignorance of the established political authority of the history and culture of the Northeast has already been proved to be true and because of this reason, the 'roots' of insurgency has been strengthened over the years since independence of the country.

Besides the issue of ethnicity or assertion of ethnic identity, the cultural distance of the most of the tribes or communities in Northeast India from the so-called mainstream culture may also be attributed as one of the 'roots' giving rise to insurgency in the region. Most of the ethnic communities in the region found it difficult to appreciate the emerging situation of 'integration' immediately after the independence of the country. This also included the question of centre-periphery relations. The ground reality of the present socio-economic arrangement that provides the push factor towards the extra-constitutional movements of several groups of people in Northeast India

mainly centres around two important issues: (a) a policy of national integration with the unresolved nationality question, and (b) the number-oriented decision-making system of the Indian polity.

Finally, there are some instances of disrupted ethnic identity also. For example, the Nagas right from the initial years of India's independence found it hard to locate any common political, cultural or economic ties with the neighbouring non-tribal or other tribal communities to form a common identity. Moreover, the traditional Naga areas were divided between Assam, NEFA, and Manipur. Therefore, the Nagas voiced their demand to remain independent as they could not locate link to the Indian Constitution. The same feeling was expressed in the subsequent years by many other ethnic communities in the region. The hill people also felt let down of their ethnic identity by the passing of the Assam Official Language Act in 1960, which in many respects was directly responsible for the re-organization of the state of Assam. There are still many who remained unsatisfied even with such type of autonomy as conceded by the creation of new states and regional councils and this led them to demand more autonomy, including sovereignty or independent status. It was in this situation that insurgency surfaced in Northeast India.